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ABSTRACT

This paper examines possible applications of confluent education to the foreign language classroom. The confluent approach creates an opportunity for integration of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extrapersonal components in the process of learning. Confluent curriculum has been designed in three broad goal categories: to achieve traditional subject matter goals, to achieve nontraditional goals of personal and interpersonal or social development, and to learn process skills that will help students attain their own goals. Each of these requires a separate and distinct usage of confluent learning experiences. The elements promoted in confluent education include responsibility, convergency, divergency, evaluation, connectedness, identity, power, context, and Gestalt. Gestalt theory has provided much of the rationale for confluent education. Activities including emotions are emphasized in the classroom, and are easy to provide by modifying existing exercises and activities and by drawing on student experiences or concerns. Confluent education can be used to ameliorate a variety of educational problems, creating changes in teacher behavior, in relationships between teachers and students, and in specific learning opportunities in the curriculum. (MSE)

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CONFLUENCY FOR FLUENCY IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Education is presently under attack for lack of discipline, insufficient emphasis on math, science and languages, low reading skills achievement, poor preparation for higher education and inept teachers, to mention a few of the problems identified by the public. Students are criticized for being apathetic, unmotivated, lazy, drugged and violent. Having taught in public schools for twenty-two years, I do not agree that this is the case in all school systems and certainly not true of all students, but sometimes these charges are not exaggerated.

During the Christmas and quarter break here at the University of California in Santa Barbara, I was able to return to Colorado and visit my high school. The few short months I had been on sabbatical leave had made me forget how charged with energy the atmosphere can be in secondary institutions. I was appalled to discover how much of that energy was overtly negative, erupting in incidents of violence and frustration. During the lunch hour I observed a fight in the hall between two young women that was so vicious it required the principal plus two other male teachers to hold the participants apart while they hurled obscene epithets at each other.

May 1984

Minutes after witnessing this incident, I noticed a young man beating with his fists on a locker and cursing the teacher in a nearby classroom. His obvious frustration and the knowledge that there had been two suicides in a local junior high recently made me realize how often we, as educators, fail to comprehend that the individual is more important than a completed lesson plan or a neatly filled grade book. It is not an option of the teacher to be concerned about the emotional state of the student--it is a momentous need.

As pointed out by George Brown:

> All education, whether we like it or not, has, as part of its process, thinking (cognitive) and feeling (affective) components. These components interact, influencing one another, and although one or the other may be ignored consciously by the teacher and spitefully or pathologically by the student or consciously by the student and spitefully or pathologically by the teacher, they exist and cannot be denied.[1]

One approach to this problem goes by the name of Confluent Education. Originating as a Ford Foundation-Esalen Institute project in affective education and later becoming a pilot program at the University of California Santa Barbara called DRICE (Development and Research in Confluent Education), it could also be called humanistic or psychological education. I prefer to borrow the introductory presentation made by Dr. Stephen Marcus in his workshop for teacher training in confluent education entitled

"Unnatural Practices/Unspeakable Acts." He identifies it in the following manner:

> 1) Merging the personal with the impersonal (the nickel definition)
> 2) Merging the logical with the psychological aspects of learning (the dime definition)
> 3) Integrating the affective and cognitive domains in classroom, theory and practice (the two-bit definition).[2]

For further clarification consider:

> Affective refers to the feeling or emotional aspect of experience and learning. How a child or adult feels about wanting to learn; how he feels as he learns, and what he feels after he has learned are included in the affective domain. Cognitive refers to the activity of the mind in knowing an object, to intellectual functioning. What an individual learns and intellectual process of learning it, would fall within the cognitive domain--unless what is learned is an attitude or value which would be affective learning.[3]

The confluence or "flowing together" of the emotional and intellectual factors in learning and teaching create the opportunity for integration of intrapersonal, interpersonal and extrapersonal components of education. Most schools today seem more concerned with what is to be learned rather than with what is happening among teachers and students in the process of learning. This is crucial considering that studies show an inadequate self-concept, lack of self-esteem, a strong need for a sense of identity, or insufficient feelings of resourcefullness or power can negatively influence the individual as a learner.

Confluent curriculum has been designed in three broad

goal categories: to achieve traditional subject matter goals, to achieve nontraditional goals of personal and interpersonal or social development and to learn process skills that will help students to attain their own goals. Although often closely related, each of these contains a separate and distinct usage of confluent learning experiences.[4]

Aaron Hillman summarizes the elements of confluent education as the following:

> Responsibility: the ability to respond and the owning of one's own actions and inactions.
> Convergency: whatever is being taught must be related to the individual's own experiences.
> Divergency: relating what is going on in the world to what is going on the moment of teaching.
> Evaluation: the seeking of opinions and the stating of values in order to formulate and express our own.
> Connectedness: developing a sense of positive affiliation one with another.
> Identity: developing a sense of self-worth, self-esteem, ego strength, in each individual.
> Power: a sense of control over what is happening or will happen to you; knowledge that you can act.
> Context: conceptualizing anything in terms of what is going on at the moment and how it is going on.
> Gestalt: making what is implicit in a situation, explicit, and finishing a situation so that it becomes whole.[5]

It is desirable that each of these facets be included implicitly or explicitly in any lesson interaction with students. With regard to lesson plans, these factors are in addition to the goals and objectives already established.

As a foreign language teacher, I feel excited when I think about available content because the possibilities are

endless for simulation and communication in the target language. I can choose from an abundance of activities and make them meaningful merely because the class can apply vocabulary and grammar to any situation. In order to stretch the traditional methods of teaching, however, I now am enthusiastic about including the preceding elements of confluent education.

For the purpose of this brief discussion, I will focus on three of the elements: responsibility, converging, and Gestalt theory although mention will be made of several of the other dimensions in passing.

When I think about responsibility in this new frame of reference, I do not mean admonishing the student to bring pencil and paper and be on time. If, however, these aspects of class participation are a problem, we will discuss <u>how</u> it feels to be late or without necessary materials or <u>what</u> happens to the student and learning procedures when this occurs. We will not discuss <u>why</u> because explanations can go on forever and usually are rationalizations which cover up what is really going on with the student.

In order to allow the student to experience responsiblity for someone else's achievement, I like to use the following exercise. Assign or let them choose a partner. Tell them they are now responsible for their partner's

ability to quickly learn a list of ten new vocabulary words and to pass a check test. The "teacher" component will be given the grade (not really) that their "student" earned. Given the responsibility for someone else's actions and the experience of being evaluated based on their performance may enable the students to discuss how that felt for them and relate the situation to how teachers and parents feel and what reactions this creates. If the level of foreign language achievement necessitates this being conducted in English, do it anyway. It is not a sin. Any experience the teacher deems as valid for personal growth is not a waste of time. It can be integrated with a traditional lesson plan of target language content.

Other aspects of responsibility: encourage the student to claim ownership of his/her thoughts and activities by saying "I" instead of "you" or "it" as in you (I) feel embarrassed if someone laughs at your (my) pronunciation or "it is (I am) silly to care about that." Also request that they change "I can't" to "I won't" and consider the difference. Discuss the concept that responsibility is not a matter of "I owe" and therefore "must act accordingly" which makes us objects rather than selves. Allow them to show initiative and self-direction. In other words, make responsibility "ability to respond."

When applying the element of convergency by teaching what relates to the student's own experiences, consider how paramount it is for students to feel there is relevancy in what is being learned. There is no better motivator. Observe the phenomenon of their ability to know all the words in the top ten songs, execute complicated football plays and give a detailed account of what happened in the latest episode of their favorite TV show. As a small child, we all learned vocabulary because there was a strong desire to communicate in order to have our needs met. Introduce them to a simulation of this desire or need by exercises such as the following guided fantasy:

Instruct the students to close their eyes, breathe deeply and get comfortable in their chairs. Next suggest they go, in their mind, to a favorite vacation spot. Now guide them through a situation in which they meet a very interesting person who drives a dream car (whatever image that creates for them). There exists a strong desire to communicate but this attractive stranger speaks only French (or target language) and they have forgotten any French they ever knew! After being slowly returned to the reality of the classroom, instruct them to pick a partner and transfer them mentally into the person in the fantasy. Attempt to communicate but only by using facial expressions and gestures. After a few minutes of this frustration, lead

the students once more through the same visualization but this time allow them to communicate using any French vocabulary at their disposal. To get them started, make suggestions for possible subjects based on vocabulary they have experienced thus far. The real validity of the experience, however, emerged during "processing" (discussing what happened to them personally and how they felt about the exercise). Most of the students became aware of how frustrated they were when limited to physical expression only. The relief of being able to interact verbally, even on a limited basis, made them eager to expand their vocabulary even further.

Early in the grading period, have the student decide in what fantasy situation they would most like to be able to have a French conversation or what vocabulary would be necessary to allow them to communicate in an important situation presently in existence. In a notebook designed for the student, not the teacher, have them create a list of words or phrases necessary in order to have a brief (for beginners) conversation. Depending on time constraints, either let them be responsible for researching the necessary vocabulary or allow class time or after school time for your help. This is in addition to what they are already studying in class (hopefully also relevant). At the end of the grading period evaluate with the student a conversation conducted in the

target language based on his/her choice of subject matter.

The Gestalt theory provided much of the rationale for confluent education so a brief discussion of this unique psychology and therapy is necessary. Gestalt is a German word for which there is no exact English equivalent. A gestalt is a pattern, a configuration, the particular form of organization of the individual parts that go into its make up. The basic premise of Gestalt psychology is that human nature is organized into patterns or wholes, that it is experienced by the individual in these terms, and that it can only be understood as a function of the patterns or wholes of which it is made.[6]

Gestalt therapy is a term applied to a unique kind of psychotherapy formulated by Dr. Fritz Perls and his followers. In Gestalt therapy the emphasis is on the present. Ongoing situations and patients are taught to focus their awareness for affecting change. In Dr. Perls own words, "Awareness covers, so to speak, three layers or three zones: awareness of the self, awareness of the world, and awareness of what's between--the intermediate zone of fantasy that prevents a person from being in touch with either himself or the world."[7]

The confluent education originators, a group of California educators with previous experience in Gestalt

therapy workshops, began to apply the Gestalt experiences to their own teaching and became concerned with further developing these applications and relating the experience effectively to other teachers. Lead by George Brown who had already done considerable work with Fritz Perls at Esalen Institute and had extensive experience as an educator, a Gestalt therapist, and an awareness trainer, practical classroom experiences were linked with practical experiences with Gestalt therapy and Gestalt awareness training to produce changes in both teaching style and curriculum. Comprising the foundation for both teacher behavior and written curriculum in confluent education, the following objectives were developed as presented by Mark Phillips in his paper, "The Application of Gestalt Principles in Classroom Teaching":

> 1) The development of whole persons. Related to the holistic framework of Gestalt therapy, this objective focuses on helping individuals to develop their intellectual, emotional, and physical capacities to the fullest potential.
> 2) The development of integrated persons. Also related to the holistic concept, these are individuals whose thoughts, feelings, and actions are frequently congruent.
> 3) The development of responsible persons. Confluent education has made this one of its major goals stressing movement of the student from environmental support to self-support.
> 4) The development of aware persons. Accepting Perls' conception, confluent education has embodied it in a number of more specific objectives such as (a) using all the senses in paying attention to the external environment;(b) paying attention to one's own thoughts and feelings;and (c) knowledgeability of one's limitations and capabilities.

> 5) The development of individuals who are able to focus on the "here and now." Gestalt therapy has stressed the importance of individuals being aware of what is happening here and now and recognizing that every occurrence takes place in the present.
>
> 6) The development of nonmanipulative persons. Confluent education has sought to increase awareness of one's own manipulative patterns while developing the responsibility that makes manipulativeness unlikely.

These goals are explicit in confluent curriculum and in confluent teacher-training programs. They are implicit in the behavior of confluent teachers and in the environment of confluent classrooms.[8]

In the foreign language classroom it is not difficult to emphasize activities that include emotions. Trowbridge suggests,

> Modify pattern drills so that they express feelings and sensations. Cues to trigger responses that not only include the basic word pattern but also a sensual input such as a touch on the shoulder. Pattern drills can also be expanded to include not only words as responses but sounds, facial expressions and actions.[9]

In order to really get the "feel" of the spoken or written language, allow the students to "act out" with gestures and even body movement emotional phrases from the lesson. When studying adjectives or action and reflexive verbs, also encourage physical involvement. This might be accomplished as a guessing game in small groups.

Many good learning activities can be devised that emphasize sentences beginning with the positive "I can____"

or "I like" (French verb plus infinitive). Also incorporate "today I feel _____." Let the exercise evolve from first person to second or third person (today you feel, today John feels, ect.).

When studying members of the family, have the student identify a problem or unfinished situation they need to work out with a family member (or anyone). Using a Gestalt therapy technique, instruct the student to put the other person on an empty chair opposite them and conduct an imaginary dialog in the target language.

For warm-up at the beginning of a class, ask such personal questions as "What's happening for you today?" or "How do you feel about school today?" or "What are you concerned about today?" (Gestalt psychology approach for identifying figure/background.)

When reading dialogs or stories, ask the student to become a character and then pose the following questions:

How would you describe yourself?

How does it feel to be _____?

How do you feel about _____? (Another character)

How do you feel about _____? (environment)

This also applies to nouns in a new vocabulary lesson in order to "feel" the words. For example, suggest:

Be the cow. Describe yourself. Move like the cow. Give it a sound. Tell us what you like. Tell us what you

don't like.

Allow them to take a line from a story or dialog from the text or even another student's creation and develop it into a new situation relative to their own experience.

In order to observe change or progression in the student's ability to communicate awareness, the teacher might ask for the following written information as often as desired:

French (any subject) is _____

When I enter a French class, I _____

The most beneficial aspect of French is _____.

CONCLUSION

Confluent Education. Is it a panacea for curing all the problems found in today's classrooms, an easier way of teaching, or the liberation of teachers and students from the traditional classroom? Perhaps all or none of these descriptions. What kind of teacher would apply Gestalt therapy techniques while teaching, purposely frustrate the student by insisting that they are responsible for their own learning and be prodigiously concerned with an awareness of the "here and now" condition of their students? Good teachers have always done this without knowing it had a label.

Confluent education, with its emphasis on Gestalt therapy, can be utilized to ameliorate a variety of educational

problems. Having spread from California to classroom throughout the world, the applications of this program have created changes in teacher behavior, changes in the relationship between teachers and students, and changes in the specific learning opportunities incorporated in the curriculum.

I consider myself fortunate to presently be a student of confluent education here at UCSB. I feel energized and sensitized by this program's-emphasis on helping me, as a teacher, to increase my self-understanding and awareness of the student as he/she really is at the moment as opposed to a computed conception of the learner. Apprehension concerning the responsibility for applying Gestalt Therapy techniques correctly, the integration of a new approach with traditional methods and content and the memory of past errors in judgment when dealing with troubled students are elements of increased self-awareness that haunt me, but I'm optimistic. Consider the following conversation during a recent opportunity to work with high school students:

> "Lisa, how do you feel about the group?"
> "Huh? I don't know what you mean."
> "There is no wrong or right answer. I just noticed that you came in late and now you're reading a magazine instead of participating in our French activity."
> "I don't know what you're doing. What do you want?"
> "I just am curious as to how you feel about the group."
> "Well, they know a lot more than I do because

I've been absent a lot lately. I just figured it was hopeless to get involved."
"Thank you for sharing that Lisa. I just wondered how you felt about us."

Lisa closed the magazine and became a participant.

She still had her power to choose.

She still had her self-esteem.

I had made contact without being authoritarian.

"I'll be darned!" I thought to myself. "It really works!"

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NOTE: Much of the information and variations of the classroom exercises presented in this paper were an integral part of my educational experience this year at the University of California Santa Barbara under the direction of educators such as Dr. George Brown and Dr. Stewart Shapiro, two of the early "fathers" of confluent education.

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